



Deraniyagala the Scientist

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As a school student in the late 1980s, when it was apparent that I was fascinated by learning about the past, my parents arranged a meeting with Dr. Siran Deraniyagala so that I could obtain guidance from the best in the field. We visited him in his Colombo residence at that time, on a weekend morning. Dr. Deraniyagala, dressed comfortably in a white sarong and white shirt, graciously listened and explained the pathways that I could pursue. In his inimitable style he declared that one must get a solid training and avoid sub-standard work that does more damage to the discipline than good.

That morning as we sat chatting, a street fish vendor passed, loudly announcing the catch of the day. It sounded something like “SaalayoKumbalawoHaalmesso...” (සාලයොකුම්බලාවොහාල්මැස්සෝ...) the names of the kinds of fish coming in a stream of overlap. Dr. Deraniyagala stopped chatting, and said to no one in particular “mokku, mokku, mokku? (මොක්කු, මොක්කු, මොක්කු?) (What, what and what kinds of fish?). We all laughed, and that day I got a glimpse of the witty person he was, he appeared very approachable to the timid student that I was.

I saw Dr. Deraniyagala again over summers during my undergraduate years. A staunch follower and advocate of the scientific method, he recommended that I participate in a few archaeological digs to obtain field experience. With his support, I did. He persuaded Dr. W.H. Wijeyapala, who was the director of the Dorawaka Lena excavations, to include me in his field crew of only men. That summer (1990), I obtained valuable hands-on field experience in Sri Lankan archaeological settings.

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Fresh out of undergraduate studies, when Dr. Deraniyagala noticed me lurking in the background at conferences and symposia, he would make sure to introduce me to renowned scholars. But for a while, till I got my ducks in a row for grad school, I studiously avoided him because he would ask me pointedly - "Why are you still here? When will you go for postgraduate studies?". I am ever grateful that he cared and encouraged me to go further in my studies. Dr. Siran Deraniyagala is among the foremost of my mentors who set the stage for my career as a biological anthropologist.

When Dr. Deraniyagala's seminal work "Prehistory of Sri Lanka" was published, he inscribed: "Here's something indigestible" (1993) in my copy. I still delight in the valuable perspectives and scientific explorations presented in his work. They comprise my go-to volumes that inform my work on Lanka and South Asia. Later, as a researcher and colleague, I had the privilege of working on several bioarchaeological projects where Siran was the advisor, notably on the Mini-athiliya shell midden site's skeletal remains, excavated under the directorship of Dr. Nimal Perera. I am happy and proud that we co-authored a publication on the human skeletal remains from Mini-athiliya, with important radiometric dates for the mid-Holocene of Lanka (2014). This work exemplifies Siran's scientific approach in prioritizing the stratigraphical and chronological basis for archaeological finds.

Siran fiercely loved Lanka. He was unafraid and bold in his declarations (objective and scientifically valid, of course), ensuring that Lanka received due recognition within the global story of ancient human settlement and early technological innovation. When I look upon his many contributions, I am reminded of his dedication and his brilliant insights that will continue to shape our understanding of Lanka's past. Dr. Siran Deraniyagala will live in our collective memory inspiring us, enhancing and enriching future scientifically sound research.

References

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Note

An abbreviated version of this appreciation was previously included in the acknowledgements section of my article accepted for publication in the Felicitation Volume when Siran was among us. He had read my article and the acknowledgement. I find comfort in the fact that I was able to express my gratitude when he was alive.